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NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE, NSC FOR ABRAMS/PASCUAL/RAMCHAND

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2018

TAGS: KWBG PREL PTER IS PGOV

SUBJECT: ABBAS CALLS FOR ELECTIONS "IF DIALOGUE FAILS";
HAMAS REJECTS OFFER

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Mahmud Abbas (Abu Mazen) announced November 23 that he will call for presidential and legislative elections in early 2009 if national dialogue with Hamas fails. Abbas blamed Hamas for the breakdown of national dialogue talks in Cairo and defended peace negotiations with Israel. Hamas rejected Abbas' call for elections, claiming it "lacked seriousness." End summary.

Abbas Calls for 2009 Election "If National Dialogue Fails"

¶2. (SBU) Addressing the PLO Central Council (PLO CC) in Ramallah November 23, President Abbas said he will call for presidential and legislative elections in early 2009 if national dialogue with Hamas fails. Abbas said the PLO "will exert all efforts to make national dialogue succeed. Otherwise, I will issue a decree to prepare for presidential and legislative elections in 2009 based on complete proportional representation." Abbas said Hamas is to blame for the breakdown in recent talks in Cairo and added, "Hamas pretexts for delaying the dialogue are not real." Abbas denied that the PA has political detainees and said, "we will never accept such so-called politically motivated detentions."

¶3. (C) In a speech to the Palestine Investment Conference--Northern Forum in Nablus on November 22, President Abbas attacked Hamas, saying, "we say to those who did the coup: our hands are extended for dialogue and we do not exclude anyone and do not call anyone atheist. We renew our call for dialogue based on the Egyptian paper. It is clear that Hamas is attempting to block dialogue to remain in control of Gaza." (Comment: At the Nablus event, Abbas seemed more energized than we have seen him recently. His normal drab delivery was replaced with a fervor that excited the audience. End comment).

Abbas Defends Negotiations with Israel

¶4. (C) At the PLO CC meeting, President Abbas said he joined negotiations "to avoid giving Israel, the U.S. or the Quartet any pretexts to show that we do not want to negotiate. However, we do not go to those negotiations for their own sake. We asked Israel to end its settlement policy completely in accordance to the first item of the Road Map, remove all outposts, reopen Jerusalem institutions, and release all prisoners, and we will never give up calling for our people's rights." Abbas said he remains dedicated to pursuing a two-state solution "despite the fact that Israel has not stopped its construction of settlements and the separation wall, and has not removed any of its checkpoints in the West Bank." In his November 22 Nablus speech, Abbas said an "American general spent many months preparing a report. But we have never seen that report, and it should be

released." (Comment: It was unclear whether Abbas was referring to General Jones' report on strategic requirements or General Fraser/Selva Roadmap monitoring reports, but after the speech several Palestinian contacts asked EconChief for more information on the report Abbas referenced. End comment).

Hamas Rejects Abbas Call for Elections

¶5. (SBU) Hamas spokesmen rejected Abbas' elections call, claiming that the PLC's term runs until 2010 while Abbas must leave office in January 2009. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum told press Abbas' comments "lack seriousness in calling for dialogue while creating obstacles aimed at the dialogue's failure."

Comment

¶6. (C) President Abbas' Ramallah and Nablus speeches are intended to position the PLO in support of national dialogue and elections while Hamas rejects them, thus shifting the focus of debate away from legal arguments as to when Abbas' term ends. PLO officials note that Abbas wants to pressure Hamas to agree to dialogue and elections on his terms. Actual elections are unlikely at this juncture, as neither the PA nor Hamas can hold credible elections without the assent of all major players, including Israel.

WALLES